

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

2 of 9

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

PAGE 01 BUENOS 02234 01 OF 03 281927Z
ACTION ARA-14

INFO OCT-01 IO-13 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01
INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15
USIA-06 HA-05 TRSE-00 MCT-01 /082 W

-----015083 281950Z /72

R 281213Z MAR 78
FM AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 0000
INFO AMEMBASSY ASUNCION
AMEMBASSY BRASILIA
AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO
AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO
USMISSION GENEVA
USUN 757

Department of State, A/GIS/IPS/SRI
Change to _____
() Release () Excise () Deny () ☒ Declassify
Exemptions b () () E.O. 13526 25x () ()
Declassify after _____
With concurrence of: _____
IPS by A obtained _____ not obt. _____
Date 11-20-16

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~ SECTION 1 OF 3 BUENOS AIRES 2234

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: SHUM, PINS, AR
SUBJECT: THE PROBLEM OF THOSE WHO DISAPPEARED

1. SUMMARY:

WITH THE PUBLICATION OF THE FINAL LISTS OF PRISONERS
HELD BY THE EXECUTIVE UNDER THE STATE OF SEIGE
POWER, MANY IN ARGENTINA AND ABROAD WILL HAVE TO
FACE THE LIKELIHOOD THAT MISSING FRIENDS AND
RELATIVES MUST BE PRESUMED DEAD. THIS WILL CREATE
SOME POLITICAL PRESSURES WITHIN ARGENTINA, BUT
LIKELY WILL NOT HAVE A MAJOR DOMESTIC POLITICAL
IMPACT. IT WILL ALSO GENERATE PRESSURES AND
CAMPAIGNS SEEKING TO FORCE THE GOA TO RENDER AN ACCOUNTING FOR
THE MISSING. THIS SITUATION RAISES THE QUESTION
FOR THE USG OF HOW TO REACT. THE EMBASSY RECOMMENDS
THAT THE USG SHOULD CONCENTRATE ITS EFFORTS ON THE
OPPORTUNITIES CREATED FOR CONTINUED PROGRESS TOWARD
RETURN TO THE RULE OF LAW. WHILE NOT CONDONING OR

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

PAGE 02 BUENOS 02234 01 OF 03 281927Z

PARDONING THE GOA FOR ITS PART IN THE DISAPPEARANCES,
WE SHOULD AVOID ENDORSING DEMANDS FOR AN ACCOUNTING.
END SUMMARY

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

2 of 9

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

3 of 9

2. CIVIL VIOLENCE, TERRORISM AND COUNTERTERRORISM IN ARGENTINA OVER THE PAST HALF-DOZEN YEARS HAVE PROBABLY TAKEN THOUSANDS OF LIVES. A GREAT MANY OF THOSE HAVE BEEN SHOT OR VICTIMS OF BOMB ATTACKS. THERE IS A LARGE CATEGORY, HOWEVER, GENERALLY DESCRIBED AS "THE DISAPPEARED". THE CONVENTIONAL GOVERNMENT EXPLANATION FOR THESE PERSONS WHO HAVE VANISHED WITHOUT A TRACE IS THAT THEY:

- (1) HAVE GONE UNDERGROUND.
- (2) WERE TERRORISTS WHO WERE KILLED BY THEIR COMPANIONS.
- (3) HAVE FLED THE COUNTRY.
- (4) HAD BEEN KILLED IN BATTLE AND BODIES WERE UNRECOGNIZABLE, OR
- (5) WERE THE VICTIMS OF COUNTER-SUBVERSIVE EXCESSES.

WHILE WE KNOW THAT THERE ARE SIGNIFICANT NUMBERS IN THE FIRST FOUR CATEGORIES, WE ARE CONVINCED THAT THE MAJORITY FALL IN THE FIFTH. THESE INDIVIDUALS HAVE BEEN SEIZED BY ELEMENTS OF THE SECURITY FORCES AND HAVE BEEN SUMMARILY EXECUTED WHEN IT IS FOUND OR STRONGLY SUSPECTED THAT THEY HAVE SERIOUS INVOLVEMENT WITH TERRORISM.

3. THE MAGNITUDE OF THE PROBLEM:
AN ACCURATE NUMBER CAN NEVER BE ARRIVED AT. ORGANIZATIONS WHICH REGISTER REPORTS OF DISAPPEARANCES HAVE COLLECTED WIDELY VARYING NUMBER OF CASES. IT IS OUR ESTIMATE THAT AT LEAST SEVERAL THOUSAND WERE KILLED, AND WE DOUBT THAT IT WILL EVER BE

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

PAGE 03 BUENOS 02234 01 OF 03 281927Z

POSSIBLE TO CONSTRUCT A MORE SPECIFIC FIGURE.

4. THE ISSUE MUST BE FACED. UNTIL NOW, THE ARGENTINE GOVERNMENT HAS SIMPLY ACKNOWLEDGED THAT INDIVIDUALS HAVE DISAPPEARED AND CITED THE FIVE REASONS GIVEN ABOVE, DISMISSING THE MATTER. THE ISSUE OF DISAPPEARANCES WILL SHORTLY BECOME MORE ACUTE, WHEN FRIENDS AND NEXT-OF-KIN OF THE MISSING MUST FACE UP TO THE FACT THAT THEY ARE NOT BEING HELD BY THE GOVERNMENT. IN DECEMBER 1977 THE GOA BEGAN TO PUBLISH LISTS OF ALL THOSE BEING HELD UNDER THE EXECUTIVE'S STATE OF SEIGE DETENTION POWER ON GROUNDS OF SUBVERSIVE ACTIVITY OR SUSPECTED ACTIVITY. AT THIS POINT, ALL BUT ABOUT 800 OF THE 3,700 PRISONERS IN THIS CATEGORY HAVE BEEN

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

3 of 9

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

4 of 9

IDENTIFIED BY THE GOA. WHEN THE NAMES OF THE REMAINING 800 HAS BEEN PUBLISHED, ALL THOSE MISSING WHOSE NAMES HAVE NOT TURNED UP ON THE LISTS (AS SOME 70 HAVE) WILL HAVE TO BE PRESUMED DEAD. THEIR FRIENDS CAN NO LONGER CLING TO THE HOPE THAT THEY WERE UNDER SECRET GOVERNMENT DETENTION.

5. COMPLETENESS OF THE GOVERNMENT'S LISTS:
IT IS INEVITABLE THAT SOME WILL CONTINUE TO CONTEND THAT THOUSANDS OF PRISONERS ARE BEING HELD IN SECRET PRISON CAMPS OR THAT FOR SPECIAL REASONS THE GOVERNMENT HAS DECLINED TO IDENTIFY SOME INDIVIDUALS IT IS HOLDING. THE EMBASSY DOUBTS THAT THIS COULD ACCOUNT FOR A SIGNIFICANT NUMBER. WE KNOW THAT THERE IS A SMALL NUMBER OF CAPTURED TERRORISTS WHO ARE COOPERATING WITH THE AUTHORITIES AGAINST THEIR FORMER COMRADES AND WHOSE NAMES ARE WITHHELD FOR THEIR PROTECTION. THERE MAY BE SMALL NUMBERS OF OTHER PRISONERS SECRETLY RETAINED FOR SPECIAL REASONS, BUT THERE IS NO INCENTIVE OR

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

PAGE 04 BUENOS 02234 01 OF 03 281927Z

RATIONALE FOR THE GOVERNMENT TO IMPRISON SECRETLY SIGNIFICANT NUMBERS OF TERRORIST SUSPECTS.

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

NNN

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

PAGE 01 BUENOS 02234 02 OF 03 281640Z
ACTION ARA-14

INFO OCT-01 IO-13 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01
INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15
USIA-06 HA-05 TRSE-00 MCT-01 /082 W
-----013833 281950Z /72

R 281213Z MAR 78
FM AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5075

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

4 of 9

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

5 of 9

INFO AMEMBASSY ASUNCION
AMEMBASSY BRASILIA
AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO
AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO
USMISSION GENEVA
USUN 758

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~ SECTION 2 OF 3 BUENOS AIRES 2234

6. THE PROBLEM FOR THE GOA:
THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN MAINTAINING THE HOPE THAT DISAPPEARED
RELATIVES MAY TURN UP WILL FEEL THEIR SENSE OF LOSS
ACUTELY. THE ONE-ISSUE GROUPS, SUCH AS THE
MOTHERS OF THE PLAZA DE MAYO, WILL CLAMOR FOR THE
GOVERNMENT TO MAKE AN ACCOUNTING FOR THE MISSING.
THE ISSUE WILL BE INCREASINGLY AND DRAMATICALLY
REPORTED INTERNATIONALLY. HOWEVER, WE DOUBT THAT
IT WILL ASSUME SIGNIFICANT DOMESTIC POLITICAL
PROPORTIONS; THE GOVERNMENT RETAINS SUBSTANTIAL
PUBLIC SUPPORT AND THERE IS NO SIGNIFICANT ORGANIZED
OPPOSITION. THERE IS NO GENERAL PERVASIVE SENSE
OF OUTRAGE ABOUT THOSE WHO HAVE DISAPPEARED, AND,
INDEED, AMONG THOSE WHO HAVE NOT LOST RELATIVES--AND
EVEN AMONG SOME WHO HAVE--A FREQUENT REACTION IS
"GOOD RIDDANCE". THE ISSUE HAS SHOWN POLITICAL
POTENTIAL, HOWEVER, IN THAT ADMIRAL MASSERA HAS
MADE A FEW GESTURES AT EXPLOITING IT FOR
HIS PERSONAL POLITICAL ADVANTAGE AND WHEN GREATER

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

PAGE 02 BUENOS 02234 02 OF 03 281640Z

POLITICAL FREEDOM PERMITS, THE POLITICAL PARTIES
WILL USE THE ISSUE AS A STICK WITH WHICH TO BEAT
THE MILITARY REGIME.

7. THE GOA REACTION:
THE GOA HAS LONG SINCE DECIDED HOW TO DEAL WITH THE
PROBLEM OF DISAPPEARANCES. IT HAS ESTABLISHED
A FRAMEWORK TO EXPLAIN THE DISAPPEARANCES AND HAS
NOT DENIED THAT WHEN THE LAST OF THE LISTS OF
DETAINEES UNDER THE EXECUTIVE AUTHORITY IS PUBLISHED,
THOSE NOT LISTED CAN BE ASSUMED LOST INTO ONE OF
THE FIVE CATEGORIES OF THE DISAPPEARED. THE GOA'S
LEADERS HAVE DECIDED TO RIDE OUT THIS ISSUE. WE
THINK THEY HAVE CONCLUDED THAT IT CAN BE DONE
WITHOUT SIGNIFICANT DOMESTIC POLITICAL RISK. WE
CAN EXPECT THE GOA SPOKESMEN IN THE UN AND OTHER

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

5 of 9

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

6 of 9

INTERNATIONAL FORA TO DEAL WITH THE DISAPPEARANCE PROBLEM BY CITING THE FIVE REASONS FOR DISAPPEARANCES WHENEVER THE SUBJECT IS RAISED. THE PUBLICATIONS OF THE LISTS OF DETAINEES, HOWEVER, TOGETHER WITH THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE RIGHT OF OPTION (VOLUNTARY EXILE) PROGRAM HAVE SET THE STAGE FOR FURTHER MODIFICATIONS OF THE GOA COUNTER-TERRORIST PRACTICES. THESE MOVES, MINIMAL THOUGH THEY BE, CREATE SOME MOMENTUM IN THE DIRECTION OF A RETURN TO DUE PROCESS AND NORMALITY. WE ALREADY SEE-AS IN THE CHURCH'S LETTER TO THE GOVERNMENT--GROWING PRESSURES TO CHARGE OR FREE THOSE HELD UNDER THE EXECUTIVE AUTHORITY AND TO CEASE THE IRREGULAR DETENTION PRACTICES (ABDUCTION) REGULARLY USED BY THE SECURITY FORCES.

8. THE PROBLEM FOR THE UNITED STATES GOVERNMENT:

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

PAGE 03 BUENOS 02234 02 OF 03 281640Z

WHEN EVENTS REQUIRE THAT THERE BE PUBLIC ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF MANY THOUSANDS OF PRESUMED DEAD IN ARGENTINA, THE USG WILL HAVE TO COMMENT ON THE SITUATION IN DEALING WITH CONGRESS AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS, AND PARTICULARLY FRIENDS AND RELATIVES OF THE MISSING. THE EMBASSY RECOMMENDS THAT THE US AVOID SUPPORTING DEMANDS THAT THE GOA ACCOUNT FOR THE MISSING. WE BELIEVE THIS WOULD BE FRUITLESS AND MIGHT DIVERT US FROM THE OPPORTUNITY THAT LIES IN THE CURRENT SITUATION. THE EFFORT WOULD BE FRUITLESS BECAUSE WE BELIEVE THAT THE GOA FEELS ITS CURRENT POSITION IS LESS RISKY THAN FUTURE PUBLICATION OF NECESSARILY INCOMPLETE LISTS OF THOSE EXECUTED BY THE SECURITY FORCES. EVEN IF IT SHOULD CHOOSE TO PUBLISH LISTS, THEIR OMISSIONS WOULD GENERATE FURTHER CONTROVERSY. THE GOA COUNTER-TERRORIST OPERATIONS WERE DELIBERATELY ORGANIZED WITH A HIGH DEGREE OF INDEPENDENCE OF INDIVIDUAL UNITS, PARTICULARLY IN THE FIRST YEAR FOLLOWING THE REVOLUTION. THIS WAS DONE PARTLY TO COMPARTMENTALIZE THE OPERATIONS AND PROTECT THEM FROM TERRORIST PENETRATION, BUT IT WAS ALSO DONE SO THAT THE GOA MIGHT MAKE A PLAUSIBLE DENIAL OF ANY PARTICULAR OPERATION. WE SUSPECT THAT, EVEN IF THE GOVERNMENT HAS TRIED TO MAINTAIN SOME RECORDS OF EXECUTIONS, THE METHOD BY WHICH IT ORGANIZED ITS TROOPS ALMOST GUARANTEES THAT REPORTS WOULD BE UNRELIABLE. IT IS ALSO

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

6 of 9

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

7 of 9

IMPORTANT TO BEAR IN MIND THAT THE GOA HAS ACCEPTED
RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE DEATHS OF SOME OF THE
PERSONS DISAPPEARED AND, CONSEQUENTLY, ADMITS A
BURDEN OF GUILT, ALBEIT VASTLY UNDERSTATED. THE
EMBASSY RECOMMENDS THAT IN CORRESPONDENCE AND PUBLIC
STATEMENTS ABOUT THE PROBLEM OF THOSE MISSING IN
ARGENTINA, THE USG AVOID LANGUAGE THAT WOULD
STIGMATIZE THIS GOVERNMENT AND INSTEAD FOCUS ATTENTION ON
THE PROSPECTS FOR IMPROVED OBSERVANCE OF HUMAN
~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

PAGE 04 BUENOS 02234 02 OF 03 281640Z

RIGHTS IN ARGENTINA.

9. THE OPPORTUNITY FOR THE U.S.:
THE PUBLICATION OF THE LISTS OF POLITICAL PRISONERS
IS IN A SENSE A WATERSHED EVENT. THE GOVERNMENT
HAS DROPPED THE VEIL OF SECRECY FROM ONE IMPORTANT ASPECT
OF ITS SECURITY PROGRAM. WITH THE WAR AGAINST SUBVERSION
ACKNOWLEDGED AS WON BY ALL BUT A FEW HARDLINERS,
IT SHOULD BECOME INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT TO JUSTIFY
THOSE ABDUCTION PRACTICES STILL USED BY THE SECURITY
FORCES IN THEIR OPERATIONS. THE US RESPONSE SHOULD
BE TO REINFORCE THE MOMENTUM TOWARD NORMALIZATION
AND DUE PROCESS. IN THIS CONTEXT, PRESSING FOR

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

NNN

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

PAGE 01 BUENOS 02234 03 OF 03 281645Z
ACTION ARA-14

INFO OCT-01 IO-13 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01
INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15
USIA-06 HA-05 TRSE-00 MCT-01 /082 W
-----013893 281951Z /72

R 281213Z MAR 78
FM AMEMBASSY BUENOS AIRES
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5076
INFO AMEMBASSY ASUNCION

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

7 of 9

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

8 of 9

AMEMBASSY BRASILIA
AMEMBASSY MONTEVIDEO
AMEMBASSY SANTIAGO
USMISSION GENEVA
USUN 759

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~ SECTION 3 OF 3 BUENOS AIRES 2234

AN ACCOUNTING OF THE MISSING WOULD BE A DIVERSION.

10. THE EMBASSY RECOMMENDS THAT ON AN EARLY CONVENIENT OCCASION A RANKING DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL COMMENT ON THE PUBLICATION OF THE DETENTION LISTS, THE RIGHT OF OPTION PROGRAM (AND, POSSIBLY THE DEUTSCH AND TIMERMAN RELEASES), STRESSING OUR HOPE THAT THEY ARE BUT EARLY STEPS TOWARD THE RULE OF LAW. THE PUBLIC STATEMENT SHOULD BE COMPLEMENTED BY HIGH-LEVEL PRIVATE DEMARCHES IN BOTH WASHINGTON AND BUENOS AIRES. THESE WOULD NOT THE PUBLIC STATEMENT BUT HEAVILY QUALIFY IT, AND OBSERVE THAT US PUBLIC OPINION, FOR ONE, WILL NOT TOLERATE MOVES FOR AN IMPROVEMENT IN BILATERAL RELATIONS WHILE THE IRREGULAR ARREST PROCEDURES AND DETENTIONS WITHOUT CHARGE CONTINUE. AT THIS TIME IT SHOULD ALSO BE STRESSED THAT THE ISSUE OF THE DISAPPEARED WILL NEVER GO AWAY SO LONG AS THE GOA CONTINUES THOSE PRACTICES WHICH

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

PAGE 02 BUENOS 02234 03 OF 03 281645Z

ARE DIRECTLY ASSOCIATED WITH MANY DISAPPEARANCES. THE DEMARCHE COULD USEFULLY SET FORTH COME SPECIFIC REFORMS WHICH WOULD PERMIT THE USG TO ABSTAIN ON FURTHER IFI VOTES ON ARGENTINE LOANS. WE SHOULD CONCENTRATE ON THE ARREST PROCEDURES AT THIS STAGE, FOR THEY ARE THE MECHANISM FOR THE WORST ABUSES. WE SHOULD AVOID PRESSING FOR INDIVIDUAL RELEASES--A TACTIC WHICH THE GOA HAS SUCCESSFULLY USED TO BLUNT THE FORCE OF THE USG PRESSURES--AND SHOULD AVOID DEMANDING ACCOUNTABILITY FOR THE DISAPPEARED, SINCE THAT DOES NOTHING DIRECTLY TO ELIMINATE FURTHER ABUSES.

11. THE DEPARTMENT'S COMMENTS WOULD BE APPRECIATED.
CASTRO

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

8 of 9

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

1 of 9

Document Information	
DOC_NBR	1978BUENOS02234
FILM	D780135-0419

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

1 of 9